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Cloak, dagger...and notebook

The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Admiral Stansfield Turner, sees nothing wrong with using journalists as undercover agents. He reserves the right, he told an audience of newspaper editors last week, to enlist reporters for secret missions abroad. And he was rather surprised when the editors reacted with shock and dismay.

He should know better. Newspaper and television reporters, at home as well as overseas, must be perceived as operating completely independently of their government. How, for example, would Americans be able to get any news of what's happening in Iran if the reporters working there were suspected of being CIA agents? Admiral Turner's remarks could give the Iranians justification for arresting or evicting every American correspondent working in the country, and the same would be no less true in other parts of the world.

We are mindful that the American press, in recent years especially, may have worn out the public's patience in asserting its special privileges — the rather extraordinary protections which the First Amendment and a democratic society affords the working journalist. The vehement professional objection to the use of journalists as spies may strike some people as yet another example of the same tendency.

But what's at stake here is more than protection for the reporter. Anyone who relies on newspapers or television for a reasonably ac-

curate picture of the world ought to feel he has some guarantee that the go-betweens aren't paid operatives of the Central Intelligence Agency any more than they're shills of General Motors. Reporters can't be anything less than the seekers of facts that they present themselves to be, or their credibility vanishes.

If a foreign nation comes to look upon every reporter as a spook, which thanks to Admiral Turner it very well might, what happens to a journalist's ability to inquire? Does the admiral think a news source, say an official of the French government, would give frank answers? How can a reporter find out what's going on so he or she can accurately interpret and present the facts? And what happens to a reporter's very safety in a foreign country?

Admiral Turner evidently hasn't asked himself such questions. He doesn't seem to understand and maybe doesn't see the value to the American people (and for that matter to their government) of unfettered inquiry. He doesn't appreciate that credibility is one of the most important tools a journalist has. That's bad enough. What makes it worse is that the CIA, in trouble in recent years because of its disregard for American values and frequently its laws, doesn't seem to have learned very much. And what makes it even worse than that is Jimmy Carter's answer to a question about his Naval Academy classmate's position: Does he agree with it? Yes, he said, I do.